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BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
Las Vegas, Nevada

The Desert Tortoise Conservation Center

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THE DESERT TORTOISE:
Slow moving reptile has appeal

The desert tortoise is a gentle reptile which spends much of its life in underground burrows. The burrows are excavated by the animals to escape the harsh summer and winter weather conditions of the desert.

The animal historically occupied a range that included the desert in southeastern California, southern Nevada, western and southern Arizona, southwestern Utah, and Sonora and northern Sinaloa, Mexico. Today, the creature's populations are largely fragmented, although it can be found in declining numbers in most parts of its former range.

Tortoise emerge from their burrows in late winter or early spring and in the autumn to feed and mate. The reptile can be active during the summer if temperatures are moderate.

The desert tortoise is the largest reptile in the arid Southwest. Unlike other reptiles which are often feared by man, the desert tortoise is an appealing creature which has became a popular pet, perhaps to its detriment. One reason for its appeal is that the animal is not a threat, but rather a vegetarian, eating a wide variety of herbaceous vegetation. One of its treats is the flower of annual plants.

ENEMIES ALL AROUND

Unfortunately, the slow moving reptile is vulnerable to a number of threats which could led to the demise of the species *(Gopherus agassizii)*. These concerns lead to a petition to the Fish and Wildlife Service in 1984 to consider listing the desert tortoise under the Federal Endangered Species Act. Additional information on the tortoise submitted to the Service in May 1989 led to an emergency ruling listing the tortoise as endangered on August 4, 1989. After further evaluation and public hearings, the tortoise was permanently listed as threatened on April 2, 1990.

Major problems which appear to affect the tortoise in all or part of its range include:

Loss or degradation of habitat because of off-road vehicles, military desert training maneuvers, various kinds of mineral extraction activities, grazing by cattle and sheep, and agricultural-residential development.

Taking of individuals for pets and other forms of collection. Also, some animals have been killed outright or their shells mutilated in acts of vandalism.

Excessive predation of juveniles by other species such as coyotes, foxes and ravens.

Fragmentation of populations because of urbanization, highways and various rights-of-way associated with electric transmission lines, pipelines, etc.

More recently a respiratory disease has been found in some tortoise populations, and it is suspected the disease may have been introduced by infected tortoise pets whose owners have returned them to the wild.

WHAT PROTECTION COMES WITH A LISTING

Under the provisions of the Endangered Species Act, the Mojave desert tortoise population is protected from "taking," which includes harming, killing or harassing desert tortoise or removing them from the wild. Violations are punishable by a fine and jail term.

The law requires Federal agencies to consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service if a proposed project they plan to authorize, fund or carry out may affect the species. The Section 7 consultation process evaluates the impacts of the proposed action and determines whether the proposed action might jeopardize the continued existence of the species.

The Endangered Species Act -- Section 10(a)(1)(A) -- permits taking of tortoises for research. It is under this provision that the tortoises in The Desert Tortoise Conservation Center have been obtained. The tortoises in this Center have been brought to this location under a joint research permit held by the Bureau of Land Management, the Nevada Department of Wildlife and The Nature Conservancy.

THE DESERT TORTOISE RESEARCH PROGRAM AGREEMENT

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW) and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) in early 1990 jointly applied for a research permit under the provisions of the Endangered Species Act. The goal of the research projects is to provide data valuable to enhancing the status and management of the desert tortoise throughout its range. The research agreement was developed following meetings in which there was a free exchange of ideas on the need for research and the presence of tortoises on already impacted construction sites. The two-year research agreement will focus on:

- Upper Respiratory Disease Syndrome
- Physiology and health profiles for a future grazing study
- Reproductive biology
- Nutritional requirements of tortoises
- Field study for grazing study
- Barrier design experiments (Fences, methods to keep tortoises from entering construction sites or other dangerous areas.)

COURT SETTLEMENT CREATED CENTER

Driven by the settlement of a lawsuit, Clark County developers were involved in funding and constructing The Desert Tortoise Conservation Center. Tortoises at the $800,000 Center initially came from locations where construction was underway on August 4, 1989, the day of the emergency ruling by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

More than 7,000 acres on 11 different properties were involved in the settlement. The land was located in Henderson, Northwest Las Vegas and Green Valley. It was argued that sufficient development activity had taken place on or around those properties to render the sites unsuitable for long-term habitat for the desert tortoise.

Involved in the settlement were the State of Nevada, the City of Las Vegas, the Nevada Development Authority, Del Webb Communities, Inc., Howard Hughes Properties, Limited Partnership, American Nevada Corp., R.A. Homes, Inc., Lewis Homes of Nevada, Peccole Ranch Partnership, Coleman Homes, Inc., Collins Brothers Corp., and the Southern Nevada Home Builders Association. The defendants were Federal entities were the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Land Management and the Department of Justice.

Under the agreement, the Nevada Department of Wildlife supervised the removal of the tortoises from the 7,000 acres. Supervision of the Center is by the

Bureau of Land Management.

Money distributed to the Nature Conservancy is for fund management services, Conservancy administration and overhead, and research programs at the Center. Some monies also went to RECON for preparation of documents.

The Plantiffs funded the research program and the Center for a two-year period. (See Funding Table.) It was agreed that the Bureau of Land Management will accept ownership of the Conservation Center as a gift, in phases. The BLM will then manage the facility through regular budget appropriations and contributed funds.

DESERT TORTOISE CONSERVATION CENTER
(Two year Desert Tortoise Research Program Agreement)

THE NATURE CONSERVANCY
- Fund Management, Administration, Document Preparation for Clearances, Etc.— $219,414
- Research Programs — $1,061,908
- Professional Services — $129,500

NEVADA DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE.
- Tortoise Removal — $265,447

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
- Facility Construction, Supplies — $792,950
- Center Supervisor — $90,000

TOTAL SETTLEMENT – $2,559,219

RESEARCH PENS AND ADMINISTRATIVE BUILDING

The Desert Tortoise Conservation Center is situated on a 640-acre parcel of public land. About a third of the acreage is devoted to tortoise pens of various sizes, ranging from 625 square feet to 20 acres.

THE GROUNDS

Quarantine Pens -- Most pens (as many as 201) were initially used for quarantine. When a tortoise was first brought to the facility it was quarantined for 30 days during which time its health was monitored by a contractor (TORT Group, Inc.)

Nutritional Study Pens -- Forty-five pens were set aside originally for a nutritional study.

Disease Research Pens -- Twenty pens were set aside for animals found to be diseased, presumably by the upper respiratory disease suspected of killing about half the tortoise population in some parts of southern California.

Juvenile Pens -- Three raven-proof cages are enclosed to protect the desert tortoise in juvenile pens. The young are sorted by size within pens protected by the cages.

All pens are designed to assist researchers, and as proposals are received and awarded, modifications and refinements will be/are being made at the Center. The possibility of expanding onto other acreage on the property is also an advantage of the parcel on which this venture is situated. When the research project began in 1990, only 222 acres of the 640 acre parcel were fenced.

THE ADMINISTRATIVE CENTER

The 2,146 square foot administrative building houses a kitchenette, an office for the Bureau of Land Management and the Nevada Department of Wildlife and researchers, a conference room, a veterinary laboratory, computer facilities and other miscellaneous needs such as areas for storage, rest rooms, etc.

WHAT ARE THOSE ANIMALS EATING?

Habitat conditions at the facility have been created to benefit the tortoise, where possible. Creosote bushes and native vegetation have been left for shade. Bermuda grass has been planted in some pens where irrigation systems ensure its successful growth. (There are more than 15,000 feet of irrigation lines at the Center, fed from a well near the administration center and stored in a 1,000,000 gallon tank.)

In connection with the nutritional study, you may see some unnatural food being fed the tortoises. Center workers may be preparing special salads for the tortoise. The salad consists of broccoli, frozen corn, spinach and monkey chow. The reptiles also receive a supplement of calcium glubinate or lactate.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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